



Q Ball

VIEWING GUIDE

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teaching the film

Q Ball is a feature documentary that takes an intimate look at the lives of players of the San Quentin Warriors team. The story's focus on rehabilitation and the road to redemption. A class screening of this film may compliment a curriculum in history or social studies, specifically around student activism, prison justice movements, and current events.

Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will encourage students to think about the importance of finding a supportive community, perseverance, and acceptance. Students will also be prepared to learn more about activism.

Grades 9 - 12

Content written by Tom Winterbottom. Designed by Paola Rojas and Hillary Good.

All SFFILM Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFILM Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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about the film

Directed by Mike Tolajian

(USA 2019) English, 97 min

Across the Bay from the NBA champion Golden State Warriors is another Warriors team, one that plays only home games. Felony convictions derailed the lives of the San Quentin Prison squad, some of them promising players. The rocky road to rehabilitation is the point of the game in this eye-opening, inspirational documentary, executive produced by Kevin Durant, who calls his experience playing against San Quentin "unforgettable."

Q Ball's focus is on determined men grappling indelibly with the gravity of their crimes and reaching for redemption, one three-pointer and defensive screen at a time.

subject areas

African American Studies

Latinx Studies

Journalism

Student Activism

Social Justice

Social Studies

Sports

World/Current Affairs

connect online

The San Quentin News
sanquentinnews.com

San Quentin's Coalition for Justice
bit.ly/2CX5dCZ

NYTimes article, In California Criminal Justice Reform Offers a Lesson for the Nation
nyti.ms/2RDM8PG

The Great California Prison Experiment
bit.ly/2uNXSRI

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discussion questions

pre-viewing topics

Bringing together sports and the justice system, this film refers to a number of themes that can be discussed in your class. These range from the importance of sports in people's lives and in broader society to the intricacies and complexities of the justice and prison system in the United States (which, of course, may have impacted someone in your class).

To prepare a class for a screening of **Q Ball**, discuss what comes to mind when you think of the word "prison." What have your students heard about regarding the justice system in the United States? Have they heard of the prison called San Quentin, just a few miles north of San Francisco? If so, what do they know about it and where did they learn about it?



What comes to mind when you think of the word 'prison'? What do you know about the justice system in the United States?



Discuss the racial aspects of incarceration and consider the demographics most impacted by the current criminal justice system.

Do your students like to play and/or watch sports? If so, which ones? What is their relationship to sports? You may want to have students think about a time when sports played an important role in their life, perhaps a sporting event that meant a lot to them either as a participant or as a spectator.

Ask your students to work in groups to brainstorm about what they consider to be effective methods of rehabilitation for criminals, and whether education programs, sports, and other activities should play a role in the prison system.

Discuss the racial aspects of incarceration and consider the demographics most impacted by the current criminal justice system in the United States.

activity: a day in the life

Q Ball tells the story of inmates in a maximum-security prison, with people often sentenced to many years or life imprisonment.

Take some time to close your eyes and imagine what the routine and the life is like when your freedom is taken away.

Write a fictitious journal entry to reflect on the experience of "a day in prison." Then, do some more research about the experience of prison and make some edits to your work. Finally, present your work in groups.

Go further

In this TED video, Eldra Jackson talks about his experience in prison, and the pervasive -- often harmful -- masculinity of it: [bit.ly/2QYTiWx](https://www.ted.com/talks/eldra-jackson-the-masculinity-of-prison)

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discussion questions

characters and story

1. The film tells the story of the basketball team, the Warriors, in San Quentin prison:

- Who does what on the team?
- What is the structure of the team and how is it organized?
- How has the current coach, Rafael Cuevas, changed things? What challenges did he face?
- How often do they play games?
- Who do they play against?

2. Describe some of the people in prison at San Quentin.

- What are their backgrounds?
- What are their values?
- Do they talk about their hopes and dreams?
- How do they talk about life inside prison compared to life on the outside?
- Are you impacted by their stories? Why?

3. Thinking about some of the specific characters, the film follows some of the players in the basketball squad, and particularly Harry "ATL" Smith:

- Why does the film focus on Smith's story?
- How does he talk about his time in prison?
- What crimes have these different characters committed?
- Does the punishment given to each one seem fair?

- How do they talk about their rehabilitation in prison? What has been important to them?
- How did Anthony Ammons' upbringing impact him?
- What is the "three strikes" policy and how did it impact Allan McIntosh?

read and watch

how Meek Mill went from solitary confinement to releasing a No 1 debut album [nyti.ms/2K7daeT](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/arts/music/meek-mill-album.html)

style and message

1. What are your opinions on the film?

- What issues did this film address?
- Which parts of the film were most interesting to you?
- Does this film have a message?

2. Discuss the film making.

- What approach did the filmmakers use?
- Was it effective in conveying the main ideas?
- What are other ways these ideas could be communicated?
- Did the film impact the understanding you had of prison and/or the criminal justice system?

activity: a day in the life

Harry Smith has a beautiful reunion with his family and gets his tryout at the Warriors training facility. At the end of the film, it is unknown whether he succeeds and the future is unknown. The coach says that "It's not always gonna go your way, but it's how you handle it that's important."

Work on your own to craft a short, fictional story that tells the story of Harry in the months after prison.

Go further

Read the San Quentin News article on Harry:

[sanquentinnews.com/s-q-warriors-take-trophy-back](https://www.sanquentinnews.com/s-q-warriors-take-trophy-back)

Watch an NBC news clip and read an article recognizing Harry:

bit.ly/2TU3wM8



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discussion questions

themes and context

1. Talk about the principles that guide the organization of San Quentin:

- What activities are available to inmates?
- What are the students able to learn, and why?
- What benefits does this sort of prison set-up have?
- Was the prison always organized in this way or has it changed over the years?

2. The film centers on the role of a sport, basketball, in the prison.

- How does sport create community, both inside and outside a prison? What impact does it have on the prison population?
- How do the people portrayed in the film talk about basketball and what it means to them?
- When playing sports, is winning the most important thing? Or teamwork and building something together? Is there a bigger meaning beyond one win?
- In general, why is it important to have creative and social outlets?

3. San Quentin has a number of programs that aim to prepare prisoners for their release back into society.

- Are these sorts of programs that teach skills important? Why?
- What role does prison play in contemporary society?
- What should rehabilitation look like for criminals?

• Do you think you can teach important life skills through sport? Which ones?

4. The film has remarkable insight and gives a glimpse into the day-to-day life of those incarcerated in San Quentin.

- What stood out to you about what you saw regarding prison life?
- Do you think people can change after committing a violent crime? How?
- What impact do crimes have, on both the victims and the perpetrators?
- Are these programs only suited to improve your experience in and of prison, as one interviewee suggests, or can they help you reenter society?
- Discuss the racial divide in the prison system.
- What role does religion play in the prison environment?
- The lieutenant says that almost 90% of people who come to San Quentin are eventually released. What do you think happens after prison?

5. Has your impression of prison and prisoners changed after watching this film?

- What aspects stood out to you and why?
- How did you feel hearing the stories of violent crime face-to-face on screen?
- Were there moments of violence in the film? Of tenderness and community?

activity: design a prison social program

You're going to make a poster about a new initiative for people incarcerated at San Quentin. Break into small groups. Come up with a new program that could be useful at San Quentin: what would you incorporate and why? In your group, talk about the things that each of you knows how to do and why they are important to you. Then, create a poster that outlines the activities you suggest and why they might be useful in prison. Present your poster to the class.

6. What happens after prison?

- What are the differences between community inside prison and community outside prison?
- Imagine if you were withdrawn from society for even five years. What things would you have missed? Important events like birthdays? Changes in society?



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activities

rethinking the prison system

Imagine you've been asked to prepare a short proposal for the government about important aspects of the prison system. Work in small groups to brainstorm some of the main ideas that you saw in the film and write down some of the key elements. Each group can share them with the class. Think about the people interviewed and the stories told.

As the lieutenant in charge of the prison said, "Hope is real currency inside of a prison." So, come up with a proposal for the government about how to effectively reform the criminal justice system. Of San Quentin, Harry Smith says that "This is a place where you can truly rehabilitate and apply the life skills that they teach you." What sort of life skills are important in a program that aims to effectively rehabilitate prisoners? How will your plan provide that hope so that the prisoners can successfully reintegrate into society?

watch and respond

Dan Pacholke, Deputy Secretary for the Washington State Department of Corrections, believes that prisons should focus on providing humane and rich opportunities for inmates. Watch: bit.ly/1F9Ksl6

watch and respond

Ava DuVerney's documentary **13th** tackles the racial injustice in the American prison system. Discuss the parallels and differences between the films. netflix.com/title/80091741

debate: capital punishment

Research the recent executive order by Gavin Newsom, the governor of California, that stops the death penalty in California.

San Quentin was the only prison in California, until this order, to house death row inmates.

Host a debate in your class concerning the role of capital punishment in the United States today and whether it can ever be justified.

education behind bars

Have you heard of the term 'school-to-prison pipeline'?

Read about how zero-tolerance policies often can lead young people into criminal justice facilities: bit.ly/2fpoQoC

Watch a TED talk on the two institutions that guide teenagers into adulthood: college and prison. bit.ly/1JIHf7

The Prison University Project is a renowned education program in San Quentin. Research the types of classes offered. Think about what classes you would like to take, and why. prisonuniversityproject.org

As a class, discuss ideas and opinions on the school-to-prison pipeline, and ways to end it. bit.ly/2K3utNN



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california media literacy standards

Analysis and Evaluation of Oral and Media Communications

- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare's *Henry V* with Kenneth Branagh's 1990 film version).
- Grades 11 & 12: Standard 1.14 Analyze the techniques used in media messages for a particular audience and evaluate their effectiveness (e.g., Orson Welles' radio broadcast "War of the Worlds").

Organization and Delivery of Oral Communication

- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.7 Use props, visual aids, graphs, and electronic media to enhance the appeal and accuracy of presentations.
- Grades 11 & 12: Standard 1.10 Evaluate when to use different kinds of effects (e.g., visual, music, sound, graphics) to create effective productions.

Comprehension

- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- Grades 11 & 12: Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.2 Analyze the impact of the media on the democratic process (e.g., exerting influence on elections, creating images of leaders, shaping attitudes) at the local, state, and national levels; Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

common core standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3 Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.8 Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5 Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

For more information about Common Core standards, see www.corestandards.org.

media literacy resources: screening with meaning

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive. Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best

be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

common core standards

MEDIUM

All Media Is Constructed.

- What is the message, how is it delivered and in what format?
- What technologies are used to present the message?
- What visual and auditory elements comprise the media content?
- What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?

CONTENT

Media Is A Language For Information.

- What is the subject of the media message?
- What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?
- What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?
- To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?

PURPOSE

All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.

- Why was the message constructed?
- Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?
- To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?
- What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?

AUTHOR

All Media Is Constructed by Someone.

- Who is delivering the message?
- Who originally constructed the message?
- What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?

AUDIENCE

All Media Messages Reach an Audience.

- Who receives the message?
- For whom is the message intended?
- What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?
- How might others perceive this message differently? Why?



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what is a documentary?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth.

The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

a brief timeline of the documentary

1895 The Lumiere brothers develop the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief unedited clips of life around them called 'actualities.'

1900-1920 Travelogue or 'scenic' films become popular showcasing exoticized images from around the globe.

1926 Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With A Movie Camera*.

1939 John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in the support of war.

1960s The 'cinema vérité' movement began in Europe, followed by the 'direct cinema' in the US. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

1968 The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos*, opened the door to activist cinema of the 1970s, using film as a tool to counter capitalist politics in Latin America.

1988 Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

2000s The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium more affordable to independent filmmakers. The term 'documentary' comes to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema.